

Tiered Activities:

Teaching Students with Different Background Knowledge or Skills

One way to teach a classroom of students with different background knowledge or skills is to design tiered activities. When tiering an activity, faculty design instructional tasks that challenge students at different levels of readiness: low, middle, and high levels. Although the students should master the same content or core skills, the means by which they do so vary. The activities assigned to the low, middle, and high groups often differ in complexity, depth of information, or level of abstraction.

Before tiering a lesson on a particular topic or skill, an instructor should pre-assess students. Use pretests to place students in appropriate groups and to determine the readiness level of each group.

Step 1:

Consider your students' reading levels, their prior knowledge, and the range of their knowledge or experiences. Also, keep in mind their interests and learning preferences.

Step 2:

Create an activity that is challenging and engaging, and that targets the topic or skill.

Some faculty begin with the middle group and then design activities for students who are struggling and those who are more advanced. Others design an activity that would appropriately challenge the advanced learners and then modify, in order to promote high standards for each group. The table on the next page outlines features for a tiered lesson that targets struggling, average, and advanced learners.

Group 1: Students who are struggling with a topic

- Requires less difficult independent reading.
- Has materials based on the average reading level of the participants, which is usually below course level.
- Has spare text and many graphic aids.
- Has a low level of abstraction (i.e., is as concrete as possible).
- Requires fewer steps to complete the assignment
- Converges on “right answers” to solve problems.
- Requires only knowledge and comprehension levels of thinking for independent work.
- Includes supportive strategies, such as graphic organizers or the instructor’s prompting, to help students infer and draw conclusions (i.e., use higher-level thinking skills).

Group 2: Average learners

- Includes independent reading materials from the textbook or other course-level sources.
- Uses concrete concepts to help students transition to more abstract concepts.
- Includes questions or problems that are a mix of open-ended and “right answers.”
- Can have more steps.
- Expects students to infer and draw conclusions with less teacher support. Instructor should be on hand, if necessary to prompt students in this area.
- Ensures that students can be successful with knowledge, comprehension, and application on their own, and with help, some of the higher levels of thinking: analysis, synthesis, or evaluation.

Group 3: Advanced or gifted learners

- Includes reading materials from sources more complex than the textbook, if possible.
- Requires more lengthy sources because students can read faster than lower or average students can.
- Focuses on abstract concepts as much as possible and uses open-ended questions exclusively.
- Requires students to infer and evaluate.
- Assumes students have abilities for knowledge, comprehension, and application, and that they will be challenged only if you ask them to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate.

Adapted from Spencer Northey, S. (2005). Handbook on Differentiated Instruction for Middle and High Schools. Larchmont, NY: Eye On Education, p. 76. Retrieved and adapted from the IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University: https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/di/cresource/q2/p06/di_06_link_tiered_activities/.